The Book Agent (1920)

MADAM, your surmise is justifiable; I am a book agent, proud to bear that title. How could I better serve my fellow men and myself than by bringing to their attention writings which are intended solely for their mental and moral welfare? The books which I have the honor to introduce . . .

You do not care to hear what books I have to sell?

Madam, you are mistaken. It is impossible that you, occupying a position of great social influence, mistress of a beautiful home which is a symbol of the strength of our country; it is impossible that you should not be interested in works which picture present conditions for the instruction of future ages. Your interest in books is due to the fact that they have fitted you to be what you are—a home maker whose example is fraught with far reaching consequences. Therefore these works that I now bring to your attention . . .

You accuse me of gaining access to your home by false pretences?

On what ground, Madam, do you base that allegation? Didn't I send in a card with the message that certain friends had requested me to call? Who are one's friends if not persons who go out of their way to do one a kindness? I refer, Madam, to the publishers of these invaluable works. They are friends to cleave to. What says Shakespeare out of the mouth of Polonius?

You do not care what Shakespeare says, or Polonius either!

I hope my ears are mistaken. I hope I did not hear you express indifference to the great words and greater thoughts of the Bard. Were I to trust my hearing I should be compelled to believe what your neighbor said about you . . .

Did I call on Mrs. McTavitt before coming here?

My dear Madam, have I used a name? Have I summoned a witness to your intellectual capacity? Permit me to withdraw the imputation. Your voice, your face, in a word your personality, amply contradict the sarcastic remark of a stranger. I judge for myself. If the series of historical works I am privileged to offer to a lady do not bring a subscription, then I must form an unflattering opinion. The books are here, I open one, you will observe the large type, the elegant paper. Glance over the chapter headings, examine the illustrations.

Did Mrs. McTavitt subscribe?

Ah, Madam, pardon me; I never permit personalities to confuse these literary transactions. I never condescend to play one individual off on another. Oh, yes, I am aware that other agents are not punctilious. Whether Mrs. McTavitt recently added her name to the long and growing list of intellectual people who wish to avail of this splendid opportunity is, I may say, beside the question. I am sure you hope she did.

You think the horrid pretentious creature subscribed out of vainglory and then sent me here to prove that works of a solid, intellectual kind do not interest you?

Pardon me, that is a low estimate to put on a fellow creature's motive and while I admit that the volumes themselves are a touchstone in many cases, in your own instance, I am always candid, such a test is unnecessary.

You will take the set.

Of course I knew it would require no word of mine to convince you. Sign your name, if you please, to this little contract in duplicate. Thank you. Two volumes already published will be delivered tomorrow, the others as soon as they issue from the press. I am very much obliged. Good morning.

Will I tell you frankly before I go if Mrs. McTavitt has subscribed?

Of course I will. I am going there from here and I have no doubt her name will follow yours.

Col. Palmer's Story of the Meuse-Argonne

THE plan Frederick Palmer has adopted to describe *Our Greatest Battle,* by which he means the Meuse-Argonne operation, is simplicity itself. He takes each division, beginning with the 77th Division of Gen. Liggett's First Corps that held the extreme left of our battle line, and follows their action in turn as they moved forward, up to the day the armistice was signed.

The simplicity of this plan comes from two things, Palmer's' skill at reporting and his profound knowledge of warfare. A reporter without his knowledge of military affairs might have found the task of describing this great battle too vast and confused to handle in narrative as directly as is done here. And a purely military writer would have eliminated the picturesque incidents and the telling human touches that liven these 617 pages. But no one else writes of war in the popular sense as well as Palmer does.

The general outlines of this offensive operation of the American army between September 26 and November 11, 1918, are so well known that no attempt will be made to recapitulate them here. Such a map as that shown opposite page 52 gives one at a glance a complete idea of how our combat troops were arranged before the "jump off" at 5 A. M. September 26; it shows how the various divisions were relieved, when they were relieved, up to October 1-3. And this is typical of the excellence of these little maps throughout the book.

Maps, indeed, were a feature of "this war of maps," as he writes. "Our prevision in this respect was excellent. The French furnished us with millions of maps in the course of the war; we had our own map printing presses at Langres; and we had movable presses in the field for printing maps which gave the results of the latest observations of the enemy's defences. A snowstorm of maps descended upon our army, and still the cry was for more."

Yet maps, as he points out, have their limitations. One feels this in reading of the task before the military historian when he puts down in cold type some description of what went on behind the lines in attempting to "get up" artillery, ammunition, supplies to the fighting front—the enormous mass of stuff that keeps the doughboy going, that feeds him, keeps him in touch with the rear, takes him out of the fighting line when wounded or exhausted. "When haste is vital unexpected contingencies due to the uneven character of men and materials break into any system. That is the 'trouble' with war, as one of the young officers said. Everything depends upon the system, and system is impossible when the very nature of war develops unexpected demands that are prejudicial to any dependable process of routine."

In spite of our local successes at Cantigny, at Belleau Wood and on the fields of Soissons, ours was an inexperienced army that attempted the task of driving the Germans before it at the extreme right of Foch's line extending from the Meuse to the North Sea. "If a Congressional committee," Palmer writes, "knowing all that Gen. Pershing knew, had been told of the plan of the Meuse-Argonne they probably would have said: 'No leader shall sacrifice our men in that fashion. We will not stand by and see them sent to slaughter.'"

Yet, "the great prize was the hope of an early decision of the war; in expending a hundred or two hundred thousand casualties in the autumn and early winter, instead of a million perhaps, during the coming summer."

That was what Pershing had to decide; that was the problem he and his staff had to face. How it was decided has already been written in the pages of history, to the undying glory of America and her soldiers.

That the Germans still underestimated our fighting ability was known to the American commanders on the very eve of the beginning of the battle. That the French general staff did not think we could do what we did is shown by Pershing in his final report on the operations of the A. E. F. The French did not think Monfaucon could be taken before the early part of the winter. Yet such was the impetuosity of our troops that that town was reached and captured on the second day after the battle opened. The reader follows division after division as it fought forward, from New York city's own Seventy-seventh that went through the Argonne Forest as no armed forces had ever done before, over to the extreme right of the line where the Thirty-third Division had to serve as pivot for the whole battle line and to reach the Meuse, where the Germans were so heavily fortified. One reads of division "leapfrogging" the division ahead of it. Of the "break through" on that morning of the first advance manœuvre that was the ideal of every commander in Europe for four years—when "by 9 o'clock we knew that except for a few strong points which could not hold out we were through the wire and through that elaborate trench system and out in the open, and still going on."

One goes back behind the lines and struggles along with the traffic and the engineers in their efforts to keep the roads up. When our engineers went forward in those days there were still some cellars of the ruins of one time French towns. After the engineers passed there was not even a sign of those cellar walls remaining; their stones had gone to the making of the roads.

The reader learns what the Thirty-third Division was doing over at the right of the line, going slowly as the other divisions moved swiftly, according to their respective tasks. Of how the much criticised Thirty-fifth Division ploughed down the "trough of the Aire." Of the central drive of Cameron's Fifth Corps "head on the whaleback" which was the heights of the Argonne, and of how the Seventy-ninth Division went into action making "a parade of their daring mission." And the reader is switched far up the western front to where Sir Douglas Haig in his "Scotch thrift" was keeping and using our own Twenty-seventh Division and the Thirtieth along with them for opening the way across the Somme tunnel, where the Australians were to follow. And then one can shift back to follow the "race horse proclivities" of the Second Division of regulars, who were always trying to show the marines a thing or two in speed and effectiveness in action.

After Palmer had seen our troops go through the Kriemhilde position he knew victory had come. He writes:

"It has ceased to be a battle on the way to Bayonville-et-Chennery. It was a march, a joyous march of victory, more appealing than any city parade, you may be sure. Our guns and transports were coming along roads which were free of any except a rare vagrant shell burst . . . There had been many thrilling days in the war, thrilling with triumph and apprehension for me; when I was in Brussels before the German avalanche arrived; when I saw the British fleet go out to sea; when I saw the French driving the Germans back in the first battle of the Marne; when I saw the British and French in their retreat before the German offensives of 1918; when I saw our first contingent land in France. But the crowning day was the one which brought forth the confession of the German communique that we had broken the German line."

OUR GREATEST BATTLE. By FREDERICK PALMER. Dodd, Mead & Co.